DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 169 502 CS 204 771

AUTHOR Newkirk, Thomas
TITLE Why Students Find Writing to be Torture.
PUB DATE Mar 79
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Spring Meeting of the North-East Modern Language Association (Hartford, Connecticut, March 29-31, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Freshmen; *Communication Problems; *Composition (Literary); *English Instruction; Higher Education; Student Needs; *Teaching Techniques; *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Composition Process

ABSTRACT

Five pressures make writing difficult for freshman composition students: the pressure of perfectionism, the pressure of interesting an audience, the pressure of length, the pressure of finding an appropriate topic, and the pressure of time. Teachers can help students deal with these pressures through individual conferences with each student and by allowing them to experiment and fail without being inhibited by fear of a poor grade, by permitting them to choose their own topics, by allowing them to discontinue work on a piece that is going nowhere, and by assisting them in revising and perfecting without fear of premature evaluation. (TJ)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED169542

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Why Students Find Writing to be Torture

Thomas Newkirk
Assistant Professor of English
University of New Hampshire

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Thomas Newkirk

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

CS204 771

College freshmen hate writing for a number of reasons. Some students, having exploited loopholes in high school elective programs, have written so little that they have not developed confidence in their writing ability. Some have been traumatized by a sadistic form of marking papers that, unfortunately, still flourishes. Some have lost confidence in the evaluation process and resent having to meet the shifting, idiosyncratic expectations of teachers. A few have basic language difficulties. But these explanations are not entirely satisfactory.

For the past two years I have been trying to understand this anguish. At the beginning of each semester I ask my Freshman English students to write descriptions of their writing processes, and during the semester I meet each student weekly to discuss his or her work and the process each went through to produce that work. I have concluded that much of the difficulty is caused by a mishandling of the pressures that any writer must face.

Picture an old card table, so old and worn that the top surface is paper thin. Now imagine having to place a number of bricks on that table. Beginning writers often fail because they attempt to handle all the pressures at once. They pile all the bricks in one vertical column and the surface breaks. Mature writers respect these pressures and know they cannot face them all at the same time; they know they must use the entire surface of the table. They place the bricks in smaller piles -- and the table holds.

I would like to explore this metaphor. I will look at five

pressures and at how students mishandle them.

The Pressure of Perfectionism. The first time I gave the assignment for students to describe their writing processes, I remember the miserable time one young woman had with it. She would grip her pen tightly, write a few words, cross half of them out, stare out the window, squirm in her seat, crumple her paper, begin another, squirm in her seat, stare out the window, and so on.

After 40 minutes, long after the other students had finished, she apologetically handed in her work. It was 140 words long, written at 3 and ½ words per minute, the average rate of a first grader. Her pattern of cross-outs is probably the clearest example I have seen of the inhibiting power of perfectionism. Her first sentence was written as follows:

> ~~When I look back~~ courses focused
> My elementary and secondary English ~~classes~~ never ~~concer~~
>
> on the elements of writing.

The pattern of substitution is fascinating--most make marginal improvements in meaning or style. But at what an awesome price. It is as if each word had to pass muster before she could go on.

Another student described the writing of the first sentence of a paper on her grandfather:

> I decided to write about my grandfather. "Grandfather was a woodsman." I began. Was he? Actually he was also an applepicker and a carpenter. I added those to the line. Now it was too long. I should concentrate on one subject I said to myself. Was it "woodsman" or "woodsmen?" I looked it up in the dictionary. "Woodsman" was correct. I reread the first sentence; it sounded OK. Now for number two.

Such diligence is crippling. The writer loses momentum and the language cannot push forward. As Montaigne wrote:

> ...my mind works at the first leap. What I do not see immediately I see even less by persisting. Without lightness I achieve nothing; application and over-serious effort confuse, depress, and weary my brain.

The Pressure of Audience. Just as a concern for perfect word choice can kill off fluency, a premature concern for audience reaction can kill off ideas or topics. By saying this I do not mean that students should not read each others writing or that students should not be concerned the reaction of their audiences. The question, it seems to me, is at what point in the process should this concern become dominant?

The reluctant writer spends most of his prewriting time discarding topics. There is a lethal sequence of questions-- first, what do I want to write on? and second, will it interest my audience? The answer to the second question, especially at this stage of the writing process, is no. Topic dropped.

The inhibition of audience consideration is not limited to beginning writers. I originally wrote this paper for a presentation at the North-East Modern Language Association Convention. As I was writing this I found audience consideration to be crippling me. I pictured myself in a room full of tweed and pipe smoke. I pictured my audience eyeing the program, and they eyeing me, as if to say,"You presumptious young man, do you really think you can say something

new on this topic.[2] The stereotyping was ungenerous but that was the image before me. As I tried to write, I was paralyzed-- I couldn't get away from the tweed and pipe smoke. Only when I decided that I must, first of all write for myself, to satisfy myself, did I find I could write.

Writing requires an act of faith. A writer must believe in what he has to say even when blood relations listen only out of a sense of duty. There is a story, perhaps apocryphal, about Dostoievsky's initial conception for one of his novels. He wrote to his brother to say that he wanted to write a long book that would have three main characters, each of whom would represent a different aspect of man -- the body, the soul, and the mind. Hardly a riveting beginning. Who would be interested in the pale allegory that would inevitably result, the updated Pilgrims Progress? But of course the result was not an updated Pilgrims Progress, but The Brothers Karamazov.

The premature concern for audience can shatter the already fragile faith that students have in their material. One competent twelfth grader was asked what allowances she made for her audience. She answered, "I usually give less detail and more vague descriptions for the audience so I won't bore them." This attitude is not uncommon. Asking such students to anticipate audience reaction as they write is like encouraging me to skate (which I do poorly) by assuring that a crowd of people will be watching me ready to comment on how well I do. In that case I get off the ice as fast as I can.

One of the great virtues of writing is the absence of an audience, the freedom to explore in isolation. As I wrote this paper I sat in my office on a snowy Saturday morning. I would occasionally look out the window to watch the snow powder the sidewalk. I was alone--no tweed, no pipe smoke.

The Pressure of Length. College freshmen struggle to meet length requirements. I would guess that most high school papers fall in the 200-400 word range. The following paper, quoted in its entirety, is representative. The 11th grade student was asked to write about someone she admired:

> I have always seemed to look upon my mother as someone very special. She is so special because she is a friend.
>
> I admire her firmness in what she believes. Although I am spoiled she will not give in to a request if she is against it. I may look down on her at times but I realize it's tough on her too.
>
> My mother has had a very hard life and sometimes I do not understand how she can take the pressure any longer. When she gets really upset we talk and I try to understand.
>
> I admire my mother because she is full of pride. Her pride may stand in the way sometimes, but I have no complaints.
>
> If my friends have a bad reputation she will not look down on them until they do something to lose her respect. She will give anyone a chance and that is something to be admired in someone that has not been given a chance.

The paper suggests a number of interesting possibilities, particularly the last sentence. But the piece is woefully underdeveloped; the writer, mistakenly, assumes that the reader knows all about her mother's background, and the pressures her mother faces, and about the conflicts they have.

Now picture this student faced with an initial assignment of three to five pages on a self-chosen topic. The student, thinking about writing about her mother, asks, "Can I write three to five pages on her?" The answer at this stage of the process is usually no. The topic is dropped. The same question is asked of other topics, and they too are dropped. The premature consideration of length kills ideas, kills possibilities.

But lets suppose the student sticks to the topic and decides to turn to her texts for help. Again I may be overgeneralizing, but it seems to me that writing texts consistently aim at the wrong problem. She looks at the section on topic and is told to pick a topic she cares about but to limit it so she can adequately handle it. This she finds puzzling because she is sure that if she wrote on the history of Western civilization she wouldn't make five pages.

She puts down the heavy text and picks up Strunk and White's Elements of Style, which, after all, looks more appealing. There she is advised:

> Choose a suitable design and hold to it.
> Do not explain too much.
> Do not use dialect unless your ear is good.
> Place yourself in the background.
> Omit needless words.
> Do not inject opinion.
> Use figures of speech sparingly.

Finally, she picks up her anthology to read the first assignment which is, inevitably, "Politics and the English Language," only to find that the rule is brevity, brevity, brevity.

If the major problem with student writing was overdevelopment, prolixity, papers that meandered in all directions, then such advice might be useful. I'm sure William Strunk's rules were appropriate for Stanford students in the 20's. But for undeveloped, egocentric writing, it goes in exactly the wrong direction. The student does not need constraining advice, but generating advice. She is in a double bind. Forced to produce more writing than was expected in high school, she is confronted with a welter of rules that rein her in.

Such advice also minimizes the element of discovery and exploration in the writing process. As Peter Elbow and Ken Macrori and many others have pointed out, writers often do not know where they will end when they start. By writing about X the writer discovers that Y is his true subject. Elbow remarks that the process is similar to a famous recipe for cooking sturgeon:

> Soak it in vinegar, nail it to a two-inch plank,
> put it in a slow oven for three days, take it out,
> throw away the fish and eat the plank.

The Pressure of Topic. The student asks a third question that is also frequently lethal -- is this topic appropriate? To judge appropriateness the student consults a hidden curriculum, one passed on by rumor and suggestion, one that the teacher may pass on without even realizing it. The student comes to believe

that it is better to analyze a poem than a fraternity party: it is better to argue about nucleur power than the designated hitter rule: that it is better to draw on secondary sources than primary ones (the writer soon comes to believe that footnotes have awesome validating power).

I remember vividly my first contact with this hidden curriculum. When I took Freshman English the first assignment was to write a definition paper. I chose to define "courage" and used as my primary example the story of Walter "The Flea" Roberts, who returned kick-offs for the Cleveland Browns. Roberts was special because he weighed only 155 pounds. When he was hit by big linemen, he seemed to ricochet.

I received a D+ on the paper and it was chosen as one of the two papers to be discussed by the class. Mine was ripped apart with both the teacher and class agreeing that Walter "The Flea" was not a particularly strong example. The other paper, which the teacher found far superior, summarized Bishop Berkeley's argument that we cannot know the external world by means of the senses. So I concluded that day that not only was Walter "The Flea" a poor example, but I had no way of knowing that he existed in the first place.

I have since re-read the paper and will agree that the D+ was if anything generous. But from that day I never wrote about per-

sonal experience. The feeling I had then has been described by Richard Hoggart in his classic study of the British working class, The Uses of Literacy. Hoggart writes of the "scholarship boy" who excells in elementary school and is given a chance to go on to a grammar school. Hoggart sees the "scholarship boy" as paying a fearful price for this success, the price of alienation from his working class roots:

> He loses something of the gamin's resilience and carelessness, of his readiness to take a chance, of his perkiness and boldness, and he does not acquire the unconscious confidence of many a public-school-trained child of the middle classes. (Penguin Edition, p. 298)

The scholarship boy is stranded between a world he has left and a world he cannot enter.

The provincial student, the student from Riverton, Wyoming or Fremont, Ohio or Dalton, New Hampshire, often experiences the same sense of alienation. As I left that composition class I felt, not really ignorant, but agonizingly young. I would have to start over. My history was no longer relevant.

I had lost what Joan Falker has called a sense of "ownership":

> If a writer, particularly one who's struggling, beginning, or learning, is made to feel humiliated, or stupid, or if someone reads her work as if it had nothing to do with the writer, it will be easy for her to feel as if she no longer owns her words. Experimenting with, and then testing, and perhpas changing my writing until it pleases me and

> others is really only possible if I remain attached to that writing, if I remain able to claim it as my own, and so worthy of my effort. (College English, October, 1978, p. 182)

Like Hoggart's scholarhip boy I had learned to survive, even to write a passable analysis of the Gorgias. But it wasn't mine. I felt like a trespasser.

The Pressure of Time. It is well known that many students wait until the night before a deadline to write their papers, sitting next to an open window so the Muse can make a clean strike. All writers procrastinate but the procrastination of accomplished writers differs from that of beginning writers. Wordsworth urged a period of "wise passiveness" before writing. This is not idle time but a time of semi-conscious or unconscious rehearsal. James Thurber describes his pre-writing meditations as follows:

> I never know when I'm not writing. Sometimes my wife comes up to me at a dinner party and says, "Dammit Thurber, stop writing." She usually catches me in the middle of a paragraph. Or my daughter will look up from the dinner table and ask, "Is he sick?" "No," my wife says, "he's writing."

For the beginning writer the procrastination period is either one of avoidance, or one of rejecting possibilities, a form of intellectual infanticide. So when the-night-before arrives the writer has nothing to build on. The process is telescoped. The margin for error is eliminated. The pressures I have listed intensify. The writer must deal with all of these

pressures at once, and the writing process becomes immensely difficult. A cycle of procrastination begins. Because writing is painful it is put off to the last minute, and because it is put off to the last minute it is inevitably painful.

Writing teachers can help students deal with these pressures -- or they can exaccerbate them. All writing is experimental, and if students are to experiment, they must be allowed to fail. If every paper is evaluated for a grade, the teacher may be inhibiting this experimentation. While students must take ultimate responsibility for their own work, they should be given some of the latitude, some of the freedom, that most writers take for granted. They should be allowed to choose their own topics; they should be allowed to discontinue work on a piece that is going nowhere. They should be allowed to revise and perfect -- with the teacher's help-- a piece of writing without the threat of premature evaluation. And they should be evaluated on their best work.

The writing teacher can give a personal response to student work. Even the most carefully written comments seem to possess a weakness Plato described in the Phaedrus:

> Writing (says Socrates) has a strange quality, and is very like painting, for the creatures of painting stand like live beings but if one asks them a question, they preserve a solemn silence. And so it is with written words; you might think they spoke as though they had intelligence, but if you question them, wishing to know about their sayings, they always say only one and the same thing.

In other words writing lacks the dynamic quality of the dialogue.

Written comments do not provide the possibility of joint exploration that the one-on-one writing conference does. They "always say only one and the same thing."

The individual conference inevitably demands more time than the traditional method of evaluation, so it may be necessary to cancel regularly scheduled classes to compensate. If this must be done to free time for conferences, I say cancel the classes. I have read hundreds of student evaluations and have found, almost without exception, that students prefer 15 minutes of individual attention to 3 hours of class time-- no matter how dynamic the instructor. Such a system also has advantages for large programs that rely on inexperienced teaching assistants, for these new teachers can usually adapt to the one-on-one situation faster than they can to teaching an entire class.

Most importantly, the writing teacher can reverse the usual teacher-student relationship and allow the student to teach. We can encourage them to lead us onto their turf which may mean we must assure them that they do indeed have their own turf. As a freshman I could have led my teacher down the main street of my home town to Brookside Park, to a maple tree beside the softball diamond. It was under this tree that Pappy Pryor, a grizzled Kentuckean, and our crew would take unscheduled breaks (Pappy taught us never to work ourselves out of a job). Pappy would roll a cigarette, spit out the loose strands of tobacco, and after a pause begin to tell us about the time,

back in Kentucky, when he had to work chain gang next to an axe-murderer. It could have been a good paper.